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ABSTRACT

A controversial educational researcher lists personal experiences which seem to have ethical implications for his profession. His list includes: (1) a claim that one of his articles contained 53 errors, but after two years, the American Psychological Association (APA) Committee on Ethical Standards had only received a list of 53 non-errors; (2) a reference to him in a newspaper article by a sociologist as a "liar and a fake"; (3) a widely circulated questionnaire among APA members asking them to register agreement or disagreement with a quoted key sentence whose crucial phrase had been deleted; (4) a published criticism by an expert of the draft of a paper requested not to be cited or quoted; (5) the urging at an APA convention by the President that members attending a particular session do "plenty of hissing and booing"; (6) several instances where book reviews were entirely influenced by the preference of the journal editor; (7) a case where a funding agency said it would consider supporting research only if it could know the conclusions beforehand; and (8) two cases in which school officials commissioned research to be conducted and later withdrew support because of political implications. (RL)

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Taboo, Constraint, and Responsibility in Educational Research

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Some time after I accepted Professor Adams' invitation to take part in this symposium, I began to wonder why I was invited and why I accepted. Behaving ethically, according to one's own light, is one thing, but being expected to say something about ethics, presumably something more profound than the predictable pedestrian platitudes, it seems to me, is quite another thing. This is the province of philosophers, and I am indeed glad that there are philosophers here. But as nearly everyone surely must know, I have no qualifications in this field. Although I suppose there must exist some specialized knowledge and ways of thinking that would constitute sophistication in moral and ethical philosophy, I know nothing at all about these matters. In fact, I've always rather consciously avoided playing the role of a philosopher of any kind, or at least postponing it to my old age, perhaps out of a vague fear that it might be a sign I was relaxing my efforts in empirical research.

Perhaps the only qualification for being on this symposium that I am perceived as possessing is that of being a living case example of one whose research has been regarded as raising ethical issues. Assuming that is the case, I will at some point have to state my ethical position and its defense.

But I will go further than that in my role as a specimen, and share with you a number of my own specific experiences, and those of

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close colleagues, that, to this philosophically unsophisticated observer, seem to involve ethical concerns.

An empirical study of ethical issues in educational research, which is the only approach I would know how to pursue, would begin with a catalog of those specific personal experiences of many researchers, as researchers, that they themselves believe to have ethical implications. I will contribute my experiences to that catalog today. But first, some general observations.

Ethical issues have received less attention in educational research than in other fields of research. The same thing probably can be said even if we broaden our scope to include the whole field of the behavioral and social sciences. On the other hand, intense discussions of ethical import have been witnessed in recent years in the physical and biological sciences. A large part of the reason for this, I believe, is related to the practical potency of a science. There is a common admonition in medicine and pharmacology that "any drug strong enough to do some good, is also strong enough to have some harmful effects." And where this type of condition pertains, that is, the possibility of doing good or harm to individuals, then ethical concerns are implied. But it is not so clear and obvious that the same degree of potency, for good or harm, exists for the products of educational research. I am not even sure that it does.

Discussions of ethical issues in the physical and biological sciences have been focused mainly on two things: (1) physically dangerous products, such as nuclear wastes and recombinant DNA of bacteria and viruses against which living creatures have no natural

immunity, and (2) potentially dangerous powers, such as certain applications of nuclear energy, and genetic engineering. But these all involve potential physical harm, and as far as I know, we have no comparable parallel in the social sciences.

In the past history of the physical and biological sciences, however, moral and ethical concerns were also raised, but not about their dangerous physical products and powers. As illustrated in the classic examples of Galileo, in physical science, and Darwin, in biological science, the ethical concerns involved what was regarded by many of their contemporaries as dangerous knowledge--theologically, morally, or socially dangerous knowledge. This idea that scientific knowledge per se can be dangerous and should raise ethical concerns seems to have given way in the physical and biological sciences to concern only with specific products and applications of knowledge, and the scientists' ethical responsibility for safeguards against abuse of this potent technology.

The idea of socially dangerous knowledge or research, however, is still prominent in the social and behavioral sciences. It has been seen most conspicuously perhaps in connection with the recently burgeoning field of human behavioral genetics--a development in which I hope I have played some little part. Certain questions in this field concerning the causes of behavioral differences among individuals and groups are regarded by some people, even by some behavioral geneticists, as off-limits for research--not because of technical obstacles that could bring research efforts to naught, but for fear that "socially dangerous" findings might result. This is claimed to justify research

taboos. Today there are highly vocal proponents of research taboos. For example, two professors of philosophy, Ned Block and Gerald Dworkin (1974), have written as follows: "What we are saying is that at this time, in this country, in this political climate, individual scientists should voluntarily refrain from the investigation of genotypic racial differences in performance on IQ tests." They go on to say,

> Although we have argued that the best situation would be one in which the scientist avoided research in certain areas and that failure to do so is irresponsible, nothing we have said implies that it is legitimate to interfere with the teaching, research, or speaking activities of researchers who act irresponsibly. The fact that individuals may be acting wrongly does not, by itself, justify the use of coercion against them.

Block and Dworkin here seem to recognize only physical coercion. But there are many subtler forms of coercion that may be even more potent in driving researchers away from taboo topics. Block's and Dworkin's notion that there should be taboo questions or off-limits topics for scientific research, with the implication that non-observers of their particular declared taboos are irresponsible and hence are moral pariahs, is itself an insidious form of coercion.

If Block and Dworkin declare race and IQ as a taboo topic for research, surely there are others who will rationalize the adding of other taboos to the list of ethically proscribed research, problems equally germane to educational research. I can easily imagine the research taboo list eventually including such problems as vandalism and violence in the schools, delinquency, teen-age pregnancy, the educational and social effects of school busing, compensatory education, the effects of preferential selection in affirmative action admissions

policies, sex differences in various scholastic subjects. In general, the research topics most prone to being haled into the court of ethics usually involve problems of statistical differences between groups, behavioral differences of crucial significance to public education. Ethical issues seem to arise when notions of equal potential are seemingly contradicted by the results of research. Ethical principles have been invoked which sanction the suppression, by subtle coercion, of research in these areas termed "socially sensitive." I myself have not found anything in the arguments I have heard along those lines, by Block and Dworkin or anyone else, to be in the least persuasive. On the contrary, according to my own moral philosophy, I find them absolutely abhorrent and ethically irresponsible.

I was happy to discover, in a recent book, that some others, too, share my disdain for the Block and Dworkin kind of philosophy, in which certain arbitrarily pronounced research taboos are openly sanctioned and masquerade as moral wisdom. The little book I refer to, and which I strongly urge all educational researchers to read, because of the basic problems of research ethics it shares in common with educational research, is Taboos in Criminology, edited by Edward Sagarin (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980). The six participants in this symposium express highly divergent opinions on the ethics of research taboos. I have not come across a comparably in-depth discussion of these issues in the fields of psychology or education. It is interesting that, at least judging from this book, the main taboo in criminology is any research that attempts to study the relationships between any combinations of the following three variables: IQ, race, and incidence

of criminal behavior. After reading philosophers Block and Dworkin, I am happy to see that the one professional philosopher, Michael Levin, in the Taboos in Criminology symposium says

> Science with taboos is a contradiction in terms. Taboos are internalized and hence especially insidious; they are restraints, not only on certain activities, but on thinking along certain lines and asking certain questions. . . . Taboos close the mind.

Levin points out that another reason research taboos are bad is that they give no real protection against the phenomena that are considered off-limits. He writes,

> If an ostrich can avoid the dingo by burying his head, he should do so. But as things are, the dingo will reveal himself to the ostrich whether or not the ostrich wants to know about him.

Ten years ago at a convention of the Western Psychological Association, I was on a symposium on ethical issues in behavioral genetics. I said then,

> In a society that allows freedom of speech and of the press, both to express and to criticize diverse views, it seems to me the social responsibility of the scientist is clear. He must simply do his research as competently and carefully as he can, and report his methods, results, and conclusions as fully and as accurately as possible.

Of course, scientific knowledge can be used for good or evil purposes. The point at which to prevent abuses, however, is not at the point of basic inquiry, but at the point of those specific uses of the knowledge in ways that we judge to be harmful. To desist from doing basic research on a problem for fear that others might use the results in ways we disapprove, is to grant them the power of censorship of research. Harvard physiologist Bernard Davis (1980) has said it very well:

> . . .virtually any basic knowledge. . .is ambivalent--it can be applied in both good and bad ways--and we have limited capacity to foresee the full range of uses. We have even less capacity to foresee the social consequences. The operational conclusion, then, would be that we can best serve society's interests not by blocking knowledge itself but by being quicker to recognize specific harmful applications, and to prevent or to halt them.

Davis then goes on to say,

> . . .some would counter that it is callous to wish to unearth knowledge regardless of its political consequences. But we must recognize that the truths about human nature, both its universals and its diversity, will be there whether or not scientists discover them, and this reality will affect the success of those social policies that depend on assumptions about these matters. Moreover, if we recognize justice as a constantly evolving social construct, it is difficult to see how any valid new knowledge can itself threaten justice. On the contrary, as we deepen our understanding of the interaction of inborn and social factors that influence human behavior, we should be able to build more effective institutions of justice.

What I, and those I have quoted, are saying is surely nothing new or radical. This basic philosophy about research has been voiced by some of the greatest scientists and philosophers of the past. Bertrand Russell most aptly summed it up in general terms, as follows:

> Ethical considerations can only legitimately appear when the truth has been ascertained: they can and should appear as determining our feelings toward the truth, and our manner of ordering our lives in view of the truth, but not as themselves dictating what the truth is to be.

Descending now from this lofty level of pure ethical philosophy, I would like to come down to rather mundane examples of what I have been talking about so far only in quite general terms. In case anyone still believes that there is no real cause for ethical concern about the enforcement of taboos in our field of research, I would suggest reading a recent article in the New York Times (Sunday, January 4, 1981), entitled "The Dangers of Suppressed Research," which highlights this concern, with a number of specific real-life examples in education and the social

sciences. They are probably just the tip of the iceberg.

As I suggested at the beginning, an empirical approach to the study of ethical issues specifically in a particular field of research would be to collect a large number of real examples from researchers in the field of specific instances that seemed to them to have ethical implications. These could then be codified as to the general ethical principles they involve, and be analyzed and discussed by specialists in ethical philosophy, who, I trust, could come up with something more generally profound and enlightening than are provided by the many mundane instances experienced by a goodly sample of research workers.

As my contribution to such a study, I have scanned my own research career for the last dozen years or so for those incidents which seemed to me possibly to have some ethical implications. I will also mention similar experiences of close colleagues. I don't have the philosopher's technical expertise to judge whether all, or any, of these incidents really involve ethical principles, nor, if ethics deals with questions of right and wrong, am I always very certain just where the right or wrong exists in these instances. I can't recall ever having really agonized over any ethical dilemmas in my research experience. The ethical choices have usually seemed to me quite clear, with perhaps one exception: the problem of dealing with the popular media.

I have often had great misgivings about some of the oversimplifications, inaccuracies, and sensationalizing of research findings by the media, and I have frequently wondered about the ethics of exposing one's work to this kind of treatment. My own conclusion, for what it's worth, is that the media cannot realistically be avoided or ignored. My policy

has been to be as open and honest with media people as possible, to trust in their own sense of ethical reporting, and their intelligence, and take the bad with the good. If there is a better solution, I would like to hear it. The problem is really that of dealing with the public, by whatever means. The interests of science, unfortunately, are not always well served by exposure to a public which lacks the background to understand the issues. A recent article on the renewed battle between creationists and evolutionists, for example, notes that the creationists,

> . . .began promoting debates with evolutionists. . . ; in the past five years, there have been about 100--debates they invariably won, because they could use reductionist arguments, contrasting the complexities of evolution with the simplicities of creation, which are easy for general audiences to understand. (Black, 1981)

The same could be said, of course, about some of the controversial subjects in psychological and educational research.

Here is my list of experiences with ethical implications:

1. A noted psychologist, addressing a large gathering of university students, claimed he had found 53 errors in Jensen's article, "all unidirectional, all anti-black," and concluded that "some other motive, not scientific," was behind it. Several requests for a list of the purported "errors," so that they might be corrected in a future edition, brought no response. I turned the matter over to the APA's Committee on Ethical Standards, which demanded either the list of errors or a retraction of the slanderous claim. It took over two years of repeated prodding by them, finally with a deadline ultimatum, to elicit compliance, which took the form of a list of 53 non-errors. (The several real errors in the article did not appear in the list!) That ended the matter as far as the APA Ethics Committee was concerned. If there were really

53 errors, why would it have taken two years to turn them over to the Ethics Committee, and why were they never published? That would seem the ethical thing. I myself, however, circulated this list and also published in a journal a notice of its availability to anyone who was interested.

2. A sociologist is reported in a recent newspaper article as having referred to me in a public speech as "a liar and a fake." It seems to me evidence for this claim would be more impressive, and more ethical, than the mere epithets. Which raises the question, do the ethics committees of professional organizations condone libel and slander? A past president of AERA wrote: "There is a double standard of ethics in the social sciences--so long as a breach of honesty or ethics or rigor is made in a 'liberal' direction, the conduct will not cause one bit of loss of reputation by the offender."

3. A sociologist widely circulated a questionnaire among APA members asking them to register agreement or disagreement with a key sentence quoted from an article by Jensen. But a crucial phrase was deleted from the quoted sentence, without any indication of deletion, in such a way that could only bias the responses toward disagreement with the "quotation."

4. I sent a draft of a paper I had written to a dozen experts in the field for criticism before submitting it to a journal. Printed across the top of the title page was "Draft. For Comment Only. Please Do Not Cite or Quote." All the persons to whom I sent it responded with helpful comments. All except one. He never replied. A few months later, however, I discovered that he had published a criticism of my

draft, which in that form was never published, and he made a big fuss about certain technical points in the draft that were revised in the final published version. That, too, was brought to the attention of the APA Ethics Committee, without any consequence, to my knowledge.

5. At a convention of the APA, where I was to give an invited address on test bias, the president of the Association, at the convention's Open Meeting, held prior to my address, urged those who would attend my address to do "plenty of hissing and booing." The APA's Board of Directors thereupon rectified the ethical breach by demanding that at the full APA Council meeting the next day the president apologize to me and the program committee that had invited me to speak. Interestingly, at the next meeting of the Council, there was a motion, which carried, that the president's apology be expunged from the official minutes.

6. Are there ethical standards for book reviewing? I have seen a number of instances in which the kind of review given to a book (or article) was entirely influenced by the journal editor in his selection of a reviewer with a completely predictable position on the piece to be reviewed, even before reading it: Like requesting Mary Baker Eddy to review a book on medicine, or William Jennings Bryan on evolution. What if the chosen critic writes a critique that turns out to be not as predictable (i.e., predictably unfavorable, in the cases I know about) as the editor had counted on? Well, I know directly of eight cases where this happened. The articles were returned--in three cases with full payment to the authors--and the editor either never reviewed the item in his journal or published another review with the desired stance.

In three instances, the initial reviewers sent me their articles (since they were about my own work), and they all met high standards of professional competence and writing style. The reason for their rejection was simply that they expressed a somewhat more favorable opinion of the item under review than the editor had anticipated. Shouldn't reviewers be selected in terms of their known technical competence for assessing a particular contribution, rather than in terms of ideological qualifications?

7. As researchers, we can have little control over the funding agencies, which are often a part of the federal bureaucracy, on which many researchers depend for financial support of their research. A number of instances have come to my attention that would seem to have ethical implications for researchers dealing with granting agencies.

They raise a question of the ethics of accepting research funds when there are strings attached as to the possible outcomes of the study or restrictions on the reporting of results. In one case, for example, the funding agency said they would consider supporting the research only if they could know beforehand the conclusions that the investigators intended to reach.

In another instance, the funding agency would make the grant only if different racial groups than those originally proposed by the researchers were used in the study. (Whites and Asians had to be used instead of whites and blacks.) In another case, a granting agency stipulated that, although data could be obtained on different racial groups, the researchers could not report group means or standard deviations, or any other statistics that might reveal the direction or

magnitude of the group differences in scholastic abilities, but could report only correlations and factor analyses among different test scores.

8. A much knottier problem, ethically, is the researcher's role when he is commissioned by a school board, the superintendent, or other school officials, to conduct a particular research in their schools. I have had two unhappy experiences in this sphere--basically a result of the fact that, since schools must be responsive to the community, they cannot be completely divorced from political pressures. But should the investigator who is commissioned by the schools to conduct research on a problem that they themselves have decided should be investigated be constrained by political pressures? There's an attitude in these settings that "he that pays the piper calls the tune," and I suspect that in some cases research is viewed, not as a means of discovering the truth, but as window dressing that will help win support for programs that are essentially politically motivated. If the researcher has a different conception of the purpose of research, there is big trouble. As an invited outsider to a couple of such large-scale research projects in different school systems, I am not sure of the ethics of telling everything I saw and heard on the inside, at least in public, and so I will be careful here. But in one case of a very large research project, and one of potentially great public importance, regarding the educational effects of school busing, the research was suddenly halted before it was half completed. The explanation given me by a school official was flatly that "the school system is a political unit, not a research institute, and cannot ignore political pressures in the community."

Interestingly, I had been in Washington, D.C. just two weeks before that shocking announcement, where I was told by a high government official, in the White House, that I was being overly naive to think that, at that time, I would be allowed to carry out bona fide research on the effects of school busing.

In another school system, I was commissioned to research the question of whether the schools, through possibly unequal facilities or teacher attitudes and the like, were directly responsible for any part of the large mean differences between majority and minority pupils in scholastic achievement. I conducted a large-scale study of this, and presented a full report of the results to the school board that had commissioned the study. The study was based on multiple regression methods similar to the famous Coleman Report. To protect itself, the school board commissioned outside experts in psychometrics and statistics in one of the nation's largest testing firms to prepare a critical analysis of my methodology and conclusions. They did so, and it was entirely favorable, even complimentary. So the board accepted the report and made a summary available to the local press. But then a year or so later, the composition of the school board changed, racially and probably politically. And to my amazement, my old research report was resurrected by the new board at one of its public meetings, this time to be vociferously denounced as "incompetent and racist." Naturally, this made the newspapers.

So we see there are obvious risks in doing educational research, at least some kinds of research. I feel there may be some ethical lessons to be learned from all this, but I am not quite sure what they are from

the standpoint of the researcher's ethics, other than my firm conviction that a researcher should make it explicitly known right from the outset that he or she intends to do honest research, without regard for any political or social ideologies. If this is unrealistic, what is the answer?

I think it still remains to be seen whether educational research, and the social sciences in general, can actually behave as a science when dealing with socially important issues, or whether, in the final analysis, it can only rationalize popular prejudice and social ideology.

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